

*Modern
Muslim Marriage*
Finding the Right Match and
Making Your Marriage Succeed

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*"And of all things We created two mates;
perhaps you will remember."*

- The Qur'an (51:49)

Author's Note

WHEN I FIRST DECIDED TO WRITE on the subject of initiating and maintaining a successful marriage, I approached the topic in a very clinical way. I sought only to expand upon earlier ideas and slightly modernize the previously available writings that discussed marriage. While I was confident that this book might help update the current cannon of self-help literature with a more modern look at Muslim marriage, I soon realized that I was unsure how to define that modernity or the concept of marriage itself.

I went to work fervently categorizing the topics for this book, approaching each area with a methodical, detached view. Yet, as the pages unfurled, something just didn't feel right. When I finally paused long enough to remove the surgical gloves, I realized that I couldn't quite grasp the enormity of what my writing was trying to accomplish. What did the word marriage even mean to me and to millions of other Muslims? Why is the idea of Muslim marriage such a consuming concept to authors, speakers, and audiences alike?

Following quite a bit of reflection, I began to recognize that the institution itself is not necessarily what draws me and so many others to ponder and to write. Undoubtedly, marriage is a human relationship that has existed longer than any other on earth. It's a story that begins with Adam and Eve (*Hawa*) and an expulsion from Paradise. But the sanctimony of the first human marriage was cemented with more than just vows. What made this primal relationship work for the original duo was not the formal establishment alone, but the accompanying care (*mawaddah*) and mercy (*rahma*) that should inherently develop to validate the connection of two beings.

It is precisely this *mawaddah* and *rahma* that allows us to move above and beyond the title of Mr. & Mrs.; that continues way past the last

china plate is bought off the wedding registry and that endures trials and tribulations that a couple should face hand-in-hand rather than alone. This compassion and companionship melded the basis of the relationship of Adam and Hawa who were essentially made for one another. This intersection of *mawaddah* and *rahma* is what fuels my personal interest in marriage. To be able to find that partner that Allah (swt) has “made” for you is a pursuit worthy of reflection. Upon finding that mate, the question of keeping the connection and the emotions alive is a whole other challenge unto itself. Once a personal connection is found, it’s important that we figure out how to maintain the marital bonds just as the first man and his wife did so many millennia ago.

Since the archetypal couple’s union, we’ve been struggling to recapture that initial feeling of companionship. But what is that companionship comprised of and how do we go about finding it? Why is there a sudden plethora of advice columns, books, blog posts, and pseudo-experts on this topic today even though marriage has existed for centuries throughout civilizations? Why is it so crucial for an expose on “modern” marriage to be written when Muslims have been following Islamic marriage guidelines for countless years?

There are no neat nooks and crannies in which to categorize every aspect of married life. And there are no two marriage stories that play out in the exact same way. There is no template, user manual, or app that can steer you in the right direction with a step by step explanation of what you can do “right” in matrimony. Instead, marriage is an unfolding of a relationship that is unique to each couple and the life they embark on.

While this book does not promise to address all the issues that arise during the marriage process and in marriage itself, it does attempt to highlight some of the more common concerns. From the first stages of spouse selection until years after the wedding date, there are ups and downs that every individual and couple may need to address. Learning

from the experiences of other couples is one of the best ways to gain greater knowledge about our own relationships and relationship building.

In order to build these lasting unions, a conscious movement must occur. Moving from intrapersonal knowledge (knowledge of the self) to interpersonal understanding (knowledge of others) is a big step that we often neglect in forming our Muslim marriage bonds. Taking the leap, tying the knot, or any other names that refer to matrimony today underscore an important truth; the truth that modern Muslim marriage matters. It matters enough for us to step outside of our comfort zones and realize that relationships at all stages require effort. It matters enough for us to recognize that the true guide book for that effort lies in knowing our *deen* (religion) and knowing ourselves before attempting to know others.

In the end, no reward is greater than the one gleaned from a marriage that flourishes and no success in this *dunya* (world) and in the *akhirah* (Hereafter) is more satisfying than that beautiful completion of half our *deen*. Our faith is the compass that can help navigate the way towards a successful marriage. Marriage can and should be memorable. It’s up to us to follow the path that will lead us towards living those lasting memories. May we always remain on *siratul mustaqueem* (the straight path) and may we always be blessed with *iman* (faith) and *taqwa* (God-consciousness) on whatever paths our lives may lead.

Much like a seed that must be carefully planted, cared for, and nourished in order to blossom, marriage must also be nurtured from its inception to its final bloom. If we truly want the gardens of our *ummah* (communities) to flourish, then we must fill them with good soil that will nurture solid plants that may bend but will not break with every passing breeze. While such analogies and metaphors may help us better contextualize the importance of our Muslim marriages, experience and examples are even greater tools for conveying reality.

It must be acknowledged that no form of human writing can fully encompass all the experiences that make up a successful marriage, so we are given the gift of the Qur'an and the *Sunnah* (Prophetic teachings) as divinely-sanctioned guides that allow us to navigate our relationships. Along with practicing the Islamic injunctions that are meant to shape our paths, we can also learn from the knowledge gained by those around us. In this vein, the following work attempts to present a balance of spirituality, actuality, theory, religion, and law to steer the reader towards a greater understanding of marriage through an Islamic perspective.

The first half of this book discusses important elements intended to guide the reader from comprehending love and marriage in a cultural, social, and religious context, to understanding the human self and human needs when embarking on the process of marriage selection. The second half of the work looks at issues of family life, intimacy, conflict resolution, children, love and loss, and the achievement of balancing *dunya* (world) and *deen* (religion) through marriage. It's important to also keep in mind that throughout any discussion of Muslim marriage, we must measure our own relations through the lens of this *ayah* (verse): *And Among His proofs is that He created for you spouses from among yourselves, in order to have tranquility and contentment with each other, and He placed in your hearts love and care towards your spouses. In this, there are sufficient proofs for people who think.* [30:21]

Once we are able to better understand and act upon the love and the care that Allah (swt) prescribes, we will begin to have successful unions that help us gain the *sawab* (benefits) and the *barakah* (blessings) given by the grace of Allah (swt) to the *zawj ilsalih* and the *zowja ilsaliha* (good spouse). As seen in the above ayah, the state to strive for in maintaining the longevity of a relationship is not one of insane and temporary passion fueled by initial sparks of emotion, but one that finds a peaceful dwelling in the heart of tranquility and contentment fostered by marriage.

May we all be blessed with relationships that strengthen our *iman* (faith) and bring us closer to Allah (swt) and may we all continue to strengthen our bonds and pave the way with *mawaddah* and *rahma* for generations to come.

Chapter 1

Mission...Marriage

**What is love and why do we feel like we
NEED to find it in this *dunya*?**

FOR MANY INDIVIDUALS EMBARKING ON THE road towards marriage today, the meaning of the word “marriage” has become idealistically synonymous with the word “love” and antagonistically antonymous with the word “divorce.” While neither word fully encompasses the beginning or the end of a matrimonial union, both words do need to be scrutinized to comprehend why the connection is inherently made. The prevalence of having to be “in love” as a marital pre-requisite leads to the logical conclusion that divorce then must encompass a state of being “out of love.” However, the ins and outs of love often have nothing more to do with the building and collapsing of a marriage than the natural ups and downs of life itself.

Take, for instance, a recent report released by the Institute of Social Policy and Understanding that was the culmination of four years of research¹. Dr. Julie Macfarlane assessed the views of marriage and divorce in the Muslim American community through extensive interviews and qualitative data collection. Perhaps the most interesting finding in this report is that the divorce rate among Muslim Americans is increasing at an alarming rate and that changing views of gender roles and expectations may be at the root of this increase. Another very real result of these high divorce rates is that more and more young individuals in Muslim American communities are hesitating or delaying marriage because of the fear that they may not choose “The Right One.” The increase in divorce and simultaneous decrease in successful marriages show that we must shift our focus

¹ Macfarlane, J., *Understanding Trends in American Muslim Divorce and Marriage: A Discussion Guide for Families and Communities*. Study Released in January 2012 by the Institute of Social Policy and Understanding.

from concentrating on fixing the issues within a marriage, to rethinking the entire process of spousal selection. The alarming statistics also indicate the importance of educating ourselves and others on building strong marital foundations from the very start.

The importance of marriage as the core of a Muslim community can be seen in the *hadith* (Prophetic narration) where the Prophet (pbuh) states: "O young people! Whoever among you can support a wife should marry, for that is more modest for the gaze and safer for your private parts." (*Sahih Muslim, Sahih Bukhari*) Many similar narrations specify that marriage is a sunnah of the Prophet (pbuh) and so those who reject or scorn marriage are not of the Prophet's people.

These narrations coupled with many other examples of *hadiths* and verses from the Quran reiterate the importance of marriage and of securing the marital union when possible. Even with this knowledge, however, many individuals today become fixated on the search for perfection in a spouse and the chance of a successful union because of this fixation severely decreases. Today, we have been conditioned to search, not for decency or God-consciousness in a spouse as the Prophet (pbuh) prescribed, but for an ideal of perfection that is impossible to achieve. We expect our spouses to be everything to us—a best friend, a compassionate lover, a beautiful companion, a good parent to our future children, a financial supporter or partner, and the list goes on. We expect marriage to offer us the solution to our completion—whereas Islam does not teach us that marriage will complete us as people but that it will only complete half our *deen* (religion). This leaves an entire other half that cannot be made whole without precise measurement of our deeds and actions within the marriage relationship itself.

When that mistaken search for the completion of our beings and the futile chase for an ideal "everything" in a potential spouse is not found, marriage is often delayed or even avoided entirely. If marriage is achieved,

our culture of instant gratification dictates that all of our dreams and desires should be met immediately. This is a clear recipe for disaster and may even be the roadmap for a union doomed to end with the fateful words of "irreconcilable differences."

Before talking about what marriage is not, we should take a step back and try to understand what modern Muslim marriage is. Deconstructing the concept of "love" is the first step in formulating a workable definition of marriage since we are taught by society that this "love" is what our marriages must be built upon. The use of the word "love" itself is problematic and muddled with mixed messages and a strange conviction that the emotion itself can be transformed into a tangible element. For many people, love is viewed as a resource to be valued and cherished. For others, love can sometimes be a commodity brashly bartered and exchanged or withheld and offered at will. Often starry-eyed individuals profess that love will never run out while others insist that love can ultimately end (the familiar line of "S/he just stopped loving me" comes to mind). Others might feel a sense of entitlement where they "deserve" to be happy but no longer harbor feelings towards each other anymore. Still others believe that love is an ideal to aspire to-- once attained it can be treasured as a valuable asset and dusted off for admiration on the occasional holiday.

From a rational perspective though and an Islamic viewpoint, love is none of these. It is not quantifiable, justifiable, or even explainable. Love is simply an emotion. It is no different from anger, or sadness, or happiness except that we place such value on it as to build up its own self-worth. Just as our other emotions are fickle and often change, so too can love shift and fluctuate both circumstantially and situationally—except when we link our love to something solidly steadfast and unchanging.

It has become all too easy for us to label feelings such as affection,

marriage mate. There is an Arabic saying that proclaims marriage to be like a watermelon where you never know until you cut through it whether or not it will be sweet on the inside. While that may be true to some extent, Allah (swt) has equipped us with the Islamic guidelines, the faith, the mind, and the heart, that can help lead us towards choosing the ripest melon possible and enjoying its sweetness for seasons to come *insha'Allah* (God willing).

Looking for love in all the wrong places and in all the wrong ways

It's hard sometimes to differentiate between the media-manufactured versions of marriage that show infatuation and lust as the key to lasting love and the more mundane daily ups and downs of marriage. If the Hollywood ideals are the elements that we base our initial attraction on, then the future of our Muslim marriages are definitely in trouble. In order to find out if you are beginning your marriage search in the right place, first ask yourself:

- How would I like to meet my mate?
- Where am I trying to find a spouse?
- Am I looking for love or a marriage connection?
- What means or approach am I using?
- Am I jumping on the marriage bandwagon or am I truly ready?

Explore the answers to these questions and come up with an action plan of what you might want to change in yourself or your approach before moving forward. Study the stories of the Prophet(pbuh) and the *Sahabah* (*rAa*) and understand their approaches to marriage. Recognize what it means to be married and define what the "right" place to search for marriage would be as opposed to the "wrong" place. Move your mind and your heart through the levels of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and eventually family communication to get to the place you need to be to find the spouse that Allah (swt) has meant for you.

SPIRITUAL COMMENTARY

"Is this Love I'm Feeling?" by Yasmin Mogahed

"Love is a serious mental disease." At least that's how Plato put it. And while anyone who's ever been 'in love' might see some truth to this statement, there is a critical mistake made here. Love is not a mental disease. Desire is.

If being 'in love' means our lives are in pieces and we are completely broken, miserable, utterly consumed, hardly able to function, and willing to sacrifice everything, chances are it's not love. Despite what we are taught in popular culture, true love is not supposed to make us like drug addicts.

And so, contrary to what we've grown up watching in movies, that type of intense obsession is not love. It goes by a different name. It is *hawa*—the word used in the Quran to refer to one's lower, vain desires and lusts. Allah describes the people who blindly follow these desires as those who are most astray: "*But if they answer you not, then know that they only follow their own lusts (hawa). And who is more astray than the one who follows his own lusts, without guidance from Allah?*" (28: 50)

By choosing to submit to our *hawa* over the guidance of Allah, we are choosing to worship those desires. When our love for what we crave is stronger than our love for Allah, we have taken that which we crave as a lord. Allah says: "*Yet there are men who take (for worship) others besides Allah, as equal (with Allah): They love them as they should love Allah. But those of Faith are overflowing in their love for Allah.*" (2:165)

If our 'love' for something makes us willing to give up our family, our dignity, our self-respect, our bodies, our sanity, our peace of mind, our deen, and even our Lord who created us from nothing, know that we are not 'in love.' We are slaves.

Of such a person Allah says: "*Do you see such a one as takes his own vain*

Chapter 2

Knowing Your *Deen*

Islamic Injunctions of Marriage Selection

- The concept of a *wali* and why a wali has to be involved in the marriage process
- Explaining the Islamic and cultural implication of *mahr* and *mou'akhir*.
- Dispelling the misunderstandings of *qira'it fatiha*, *katb ilkitab*, *nikah*, and *walimah*.

Pre-requisites and spousal rights from an Islamic Perspective

- What rights does a wife have over her husband?
- What rights does a husband have over his wife?
- What rights do families have over the couple?

Praying *Salatul-Istikharah* and the importance of *dua*

- Inclusion of the actual *dua* used in *salatul-istikharah*
- Understanding how *dua* can help a marriage succeed
- *Hadiths* and *ayahs* that discuss the divine aspect involved in successful marriage

Polygamy in the modern Muslim marriage

- A brief look at permissibility and desirability in our times

The Holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said: "When a man marries, he has fulfilled half of his religion, so let him fear Allah regarding the remaining half."

"O People, it is true that you have certain rights with regard to your women, but they also have rights over you. Remember that you have taken them as your wives only under a trust from God and with His permission. If they abide by your right then to them belongs the right to be fed and clothed in kindness. Do treat your women well and be kind to them for they are your partners and committed helpers. And it is your right that they do not make friends with any one of whom you do not approve, as well as never to be unchaste." - Prophet's (pbuh) last sermon

Knowing your *deen* (religion)

Educating yourself on the religious aspects of marriage is incumbent upon anyone seeking a spouse or ready to embark on the marriage journey. Below are the responses to an email interview conducted with Imam Sohaib Sultan regarding the most frequently asked questions that I have encountered from many Muslims today who are thinking about marriage.

Q. Please define the concept of *wali*. If someone is interested in pursuing a partner for marriage, should the first step be seeking out the *wali* or can he or she approach the potential spouse first and "get to know them"? If a woman is living or studying overseas without her family, can she appoint a *wali*? How does she go about doing this? What are the Islamic etiquette rules in respect to meeting the *wali*?

A. A *wali* is the male guardian of a Muslim woman. Typically the *wali* is a woman's father if he is alive and a believer. If not, then it is the closest paternal male relative. If this too does not exist, then the woman may appoint a righteous *wali* from the community who can help her with the marriage process. The appointed wali can be any post-pubescent righteous believing male, but wisdom and standing in the community should be considered as well. *Imams* or chaplains or the like are often good choices when appointing a wali. The *wali* should help facilitate a woman's marriage, offer good counsel in the marriage process, and seek to protect her from

Chapter 5

Knowing Your Spouse

People always fall in love with the most perfect aspects of each other's personalities. Who wouldn't? Anybody can love the most wonderful parts of another person. But that's not the clever trick. The really clever trick is this: Can you accept the flaws? Can you look at your partner's faults honestly and say, 'I can work around that. I can make something out of it?' Because the good stuff is always going to be there, and it's always going to be pretty and sparkly, but the [bad stuff] underneath can ruin you.

— Elizabeth Gilbert,

Committed: A Skeptic Makes Peace with Marriage

THERE IS A VERY DELIBERATE REASON as to why the chapters in this book transition from "Knowing yourself" to "Knowing your *deen*" to "Choosing your spouse" before getting to know that person. This is because most couples continue to discover each other long after they have chosen their partner. As their lives intertwine and their marriages evolve and progress, the process of discovery continues to shape and influence their perceptions of each other. We've already established that the knowledge of self and *deen* are prerequisites to marriage. However, the knowledge of one's spouse is a continuous journey of joy that unfolds on a daily basis in the merging of two lives.

Fully knowing your spouse is not something that can be attained during the initiation stage of relationship building when prospective partners put their best foot forward in an attempt to woo the other. Sometimes, true selves are subconsciously masked in trying to meet the other person's expectations of who you are or in trying to be the person you think he or she is looking for. For example, during my own engagement period, I recall being very embarrassed to eat as I normally would in front of

my fiancée. So, I would pick at my food and often leave the table still hungry--- not because I was trying to deceive but simply because conversation took priority over eating. Once we were married, my vigorous appetite slowly returned and the more comfortable we became with each other the more we revealed of ourselves. Many months into our marriage, my husband said, "I was a little worried during our engagement period that I would starve during our relationship because you seemed to eat like a bird and I always felt obliged to mirror the amount that you ate. So when I was with you, I was always hungry. Now, I'm so relieved to find out after marriage that you really do eat like a normal person!"

Often, the marriage journey itself is the framework for revealing identity and character. That bond that develops when a couple grows together is often the most comprehensive structure for the revelation of self. This is not to say that you should be jumping blindly into your marriage without any idea about whether or not you and your potential mate are compatible. What it does mean is that the expectation of really knowing someone prior to marriage is often an unrealistic stumbling block for many potentially successful unions.

Once you have comfortably embarked on the process of self discovery, it's time to roll up your metaphoric sleeves and dive head-first into getting to know your spouse. However, don't imagine that within weeks or months or even years of marriage you will be able to know your spouse as well as you know yourself. Studies have shown that people who date for years or cohabitate often find that once they marry, they feel as if they really never knew their spouse at all. Other reports have shown that there is a higher incidence of divorce among couples who have lived together prior to marriage than those who have never lived together. There is also a greater incidence of divorce for those who have had more active premarital relations than those who remained monogamous and did not engage in any premarital consummative relationships.⁴

⁴ *The New York Times* "The Downside of Cohabiting Before Marriage," Meg Jay, (Apr 14, '12)

Spiritual Commentary

A Successful Marriage by Yasmin Mogahed

"And among His signs is that He created for you mates from among yourselves that you may dwell in tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between you; verily, in that are signs for people who reflect."
(Qur'an, 30:21)

We've all read this verse on countless marriage announcements, but how many have actualized it? How many of our marriages really embody that love and mercy described by Allah? What is going wrong when so many of our marriages are ending in divorce? According to Dr. Emerson Eggerichs, author of *Love & Respect: the Love She Most Desires; the Respect He Desperately Needs*, the answer is simple. In his book, Eggerichs explains that extensive research has found that a man's primary need is for respect, while a woman's primary need is for love. He describes what he calls the "crazy cycle"—the pattern of argumentation that results when the wife does not show respect and the husband does not show love. He explains how the two reinforce and cause one another. In other words, when a wife feels that her husband is acting unloving, she often reacts with disrespect, which in turn makes the husband act even more unloving.

Eggerichs argues that the solution to the "crazy cycle" is for the wife to show unconditional respect to her husband and for the husband to show unconditional love to his wife. This means that a wife should not say that first her husband must be loving before she will show him respect. By doing so, she will only bring about more unloving behavior. And a husband should not say that first his wife must be respectful before he will show her love. By doing so, he will only bring about more disrespectful behavior. The two must be unconditional.

When I reflected on this concept, I realized that looking at the Qur'an

and prophetic wisdom, there are no two concepts more stressed with regards to the marital relationship.

To men, the Prophet (pbuh) said, "Take good care of women, for they were created from a bent rib, and the most curved part of it is its top; if you try to straighten it, you will break it, and if you leave it, it will remain arched, so take good care of women." (Bukhari & Muslim) He has further stressed: "The most perfect believer in the matter of faith is one who has excellent behavior; and the best among you are those who behave best towards their wives." (At-Tirmidhi). The Prophet (pbuh) has also said, "A believing man should not hate a believing woman; if he dislikes one of her characteristics, he will be pleased with another." (Muslim)

Allah (swt) says: "...Live with them in kindness. For if you dislike them – perhaps you dislike a thing and Allah makes therein much good." (Qur'an, 4:19) In these jewels of wisdom, men are urged to be kind and loving towards their wives. Moreover, they are urged to overlook their wife's faults when showing that kindness and love. On the other hand, when addressing the wife, the focus is different. Why are women not told again and again to be kind and loving towards their husbands? Perhaps it is because unconditional love already comes naturally to women. Few men complain that their wives do not love them. But many complain that their wives do not respect them. And it is this sentiment which is most stressed in the Qur'an and *sunnah*, with regards to wives.

Respect can be manifest in a number of ways. One of the most important ways to show respect is the respect of one's wishes. When someone says, "I respect your advice," they mean "I will follow your advice." Respecting a leader means doing what he says. And respecting one's husband means respecting his wishes. The Prophet (pbuh) has said: "When any woman prays her five, fasts her month, guards her body and obeys her husband, it is said to her: 'Enter paradise from whichever of its doors you wish.'" [At-Tirmidhi]